



Hard choices

In the world of wood flooring, there are more choices than ever. That's the tricky part.



By Duo Dickinson, AIA, an award-winning architect who has taught at Yale College and Roger Williams University. He is the author of six books. The goal of his most recent book, *The House You Build* (The Taunton Press; 2004), is to help readers build homes with excellent architecture while staying within their budgets. Dickinson lives in Madison, Connecticut.

Q I want the look of hardwood floors in my new home, but I've heard traditional wood floors can be a lot of work. What other options do I have?

A Wood and wood-look flooring comes in more varieties than ever, and each approach has its pros and cons.

Traditional hardwood strip flooring is the most common choice. It's laid down raw, then sanded and finished in place. Though it's often the least-expensive wood flooring available, it involves a long installation time during which you probably won't be able to walk on your floors for several days.

Prefinished wood flooring costs more per square foot, but it's ready to be walked on immediately after it is laid down. Don't be surprised if it needs a minor touch-up after installation because some damage may occur as it is put into place.

Engineered-wood flooring is essentially plywood. It has a few hard substrates that keep the floor flat and stable, and is topped by a thin ply of a beautiful and desirable wood species. Unlike traditional wood floors, which tend to swell and shrink, leaving gaps between the planks, engineered-wood flooring doesn't move much. It is usually more expensive than solid wood. Like prefinished wood, engineered wood might need some touch-up after installation.

Laminate flooring is created by setting a thin layer of wood veneer (or a photograph of wood veneer) onto a durable backing board. Though usually somewhat less expensive than natural-wood floors, laminate floors are seen by some as less beautiful than their natural counterparts. Among their benefits: They can go in under conditions of high humidity and fit tight dimensions that are impossible for natural-wood floors.

Q Our builder warned us about higher-than-normal humidity levels in our newly built home. What causes this? And, if it turns out to be a big problem, what can we do about it?

A The same things that make your home cheaper to heat and cool can cause humidity to build up inside. Simply put, your house might be too tightly sealed. If your home's internal humidity exceeds 60–70 percent on a regular basis, it may be unhealthy. The easiest way to deal with this is to install a dehumidifier into your existing centralized forced-air HVAC system, or to use an energy-recovery ventilator, which pulls fresh air into your home while preventing rapid heat loss.

Q We'd like to install skylights into our new home, but we're concerned that they'll make the house too hot. Should we avoid them?

A Unless a home has a very shallow roof pitch, overheating typically occurs only if skylights are in a portion of the roof that faces due south or west. If you're still worried, think about installing ventilating skylights, which hinge open to release built-up heat. Most skylight companies offer solar screens, shades, and blinds for skylights, which can be helpful if you rely on air-conditioning to cool your home. You can choose between electric controls, which allow you to close the shades with a remote, or manual controls, which will require you to pull a string or turn a knob.



ABOVE | Skylights let in heat along with those glorious rays. To cool things off, equip roof windows with blinds, shades, or solar screens.

The humidity range in a healthy house is usually between 30 and 60 percent.



LEFT | Perhaps houses are too efficient now. Tighter construction may mean more humidity problems.

Q What is the best material to use for a new deck? What about ipé and other rain forest woods.

A Over the last 10 years there's been an explosion of materials available for decks. Choices range from natural forest products to tough composites.

Cedar and redwood have been traditional favorites, but redwood is becoming less readily available. Cedar is relatively soft and, even when finished, has a shorter life expectancy than new plantation-grown "faux teaks," such as ipé.

Ipe, ironwood, and Pau Lope can be quite expensive, but their life expectancy is extraordinary. Many manufacturers claim that their products are sustainable, meaning that the wood was grown on a plantation rather than harvested in the wild. However, sustainability has been a subject of dispute.

Mahogany is a good option. Although less expensive than the "faux teaks," it's also less durable. It is quite beautiful when finished.

Recycled plastics are now offered as a sustainable alternative. Keep in mind, though, that these materials can be expensive and the installation can be difficult.

Clear, pressure-treated wood is the least-expensive choice. Pressure-treated decks last long, but wood may shrink or crack, and it requires regular maintenance.

